

THE SILENT BARRIER

BY LOUIS TRACY

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

CHARLES K. SPENSER, a young American mining engineer who had suddenly become rich in Colorado, was spending a holiday in London, when he overheard two young women conversing in a restaurant. Helen Wynton was a beautiful English girl who earned her living classifying beetles for an eccentric entomologist and writing paragraphs for "The Firefly," a second rate London magazine; and the other, Millicent Jaques, was an actress.

Helen expressed what seemed to her a hopeless wish that she might visit Switzerland; and Spenser at once determined to be her fairy godfather and grant her wish. So he arranged with "The Firefly" to send her to Switzerland to furnish a series of articles; he (Spenser) paying all expenses, but remaining unknown to all except the editor.

Mark Bower, a man of great wealth and influence, but utterly unscrupulous, who had befriended Millicent, became enamoured of Helen and contrived to visit Switzerland at the same time. Spenser saw through Bower's purpose and also departed for the Engadine to protect Helen.

The first friend Helen made at Maloggia was Christian Stampa, an old man who in his youth had been one of the most famous Alpine guides. He took a fancy to her because she resembled his daughter, who had died. The women at the hotel took a snobbish stand against Helen; so she welcomed the arrival of Bower.

CHAPTER VII. (Continued)

Some Skirmishing

AS Spenser passed the bar he heard Bower's smooth, well rounded accents through the half-open door. "Nothing I should like better," he was saying. "Are you tired? If not, bring your friend to my rooms now. Although I have been in the train all night, I am fit as a fiddle."

"Let me see. I left him in the smoking room with our *padre*—"

It was Dunston who spoke; but Bower broke in: "Oh, keep the clergy out of it! They make such a song about these things if they hear of them!"

"I was going to say that if he is not there he will be in his room. He is two doors from me, No. 61, I think. Shall I fetch him?"

"Do, by all means. By Jove! I didn't expect to get any decent play here!"

Spenser slipped into a small vestibule where he had left a hat and overcoat. He remained there till Dunston crossed the hall and entered the elevator. Then he went out, meaning to stroll and smoke in the moonlight for an hour. It would be easier to back out of the promised game in the morning than at that moment. Moreover, in the clear, still air he could plan a course of action, the need of which was becoming insistent.

He was blessed, or cursed, with a stubborn will, and he knew it. Hitherto, it had been exercised on a theory wrapped in hard granite, and the granite had yielded, justifying the theory. Now he was brought face to face with a woman's temperament, and his experience of that elusive and complex mixture of attributes was of the slightest. Attractive young women are as plentiful in Colorado as cranberries; but never one of them had withdrawn his mind's eye from his work. Why, then, was he so ready now to devote his energies to the safeguarding of Helen Wynton? It was absurd to pretend that he was responsible for her future well being because of the whim that sent her on a holiday. She was well able to take care of herself. She had earned her own living before he met her; she had risen imperiously above the petty malice displayed by some of the residents in the hotel; there was a reasonable probability that she would become the wife of a man highly placed and wealthy. Every consideration told in favor of a policy of non-interference. The smoking of an inch of good cigar placed the matter in such a convincing light that Spenser was half resolved to abide by his earlier decision and leave Maloggia next morning.

But the other half, made up of inclination, pleaded against all the urging of expediency. He deemed the vicar an honest man, and that stout hearted phrase of his stuck. Yet, whether he went or stayed, the ultimate solution of the problem lay with Helen herself. Once on speaking terms with her, he could form a more decided view. It was wonderful how one's estimate of a man or a woman could be modified in the course of a few minutes' conversation. Well, he would settle things that way, and meanwhile enjoy the beauty of a wondrous night.

TURNING sharply on his heel, he took the road by the lake. He had not gone three hundred

yards before he saw a woman standing near the low wall that guarded the embanked highway from the water. She was looking at the dark mirror of the lake, and seemed to be identifying the stars reflected in it. Three or four times, as he approached, she tilted her head back and gazed at the sky. The skirt of a white dress was visible below a heavy ulster; a knitted shawl was wrapped loosely over her hair and neck, and the ends were draped deftly across her shoulders; but before she turned to see who was coming along the road, Spenser had recognized her. Thus, in a sense, he was a trifle the more prepared of the two for this unforeseen meeting, and he hailed it as supplying the answer to his doubts.

"Now," said he to himself, "I shall know in ten seconds whether or not I travel west by north to-morrow."

Helen did not avert her glance instantly. Nor did she at once resume a stroll evidently interrupted to take in deep breaths of the beauty of the scene. That was encouraging to the American,—she expected him to speak to her.

He halted in the middle of the road. If he was mistaken, he did not wish to alarm her. "If you will pardon the somewhat unorthodox time and place, I should like to make myself known to you, Miss Wynton," he said, lifting his cap.

"You are Mr. Spenser?" she answered, with a frank smile.

"Yes, I have a letter of introduction from Mr. Mackenzie."



Helen Knew that a Woman Should Not Impose Her Doubts on the Men in a Mountaineering Party.

J. V. McFALL



"So have I. What do we do next? Exchange letters? Mine is in the hotel."

"Suppose we just shake?"

"Well, that is certainly the most direct way."

Their hands met. They were both aware of a whiff of nervousness. For some reason, the commonplace greetings of politeness fell awkwardly from their lips. In such a predicament a woman may always be trusted to find the way out.

"It is rather absurd that we should be saying how pleased we are that Mr. Mackenzie thought of writing those letters, while in reality I am horribly conscious that I ought not to be here at all, and you are probably thinking that I am quite an amazing person," and Helen laughed light heartedly.

"That is part of my thought," said Spenser.

"Won't you tell me the remainder?"

"May I?"

"Please do. I am in chastened mood."

"I wish I was skilled in the trick of words; then I might say something real cute. As it is, I can supply only a sort of condensed statement,—something about a nymph, a moonlit lake, the spirit of the glen,—nice catchy phrases everyone,—with a line thrown in from Shelley about an 'orbéd maiden with white fire laden.' Let me go back a hundred yards, Miss Wynton, and I shall return with the whole thing in order."

"With such material I believe you would bring me a sonnet."

"No. I hail from the wild and woolly West, where life itself is a poem; so I stick to prose. There is a queer sort of kink in human nature to account for that."

"On the principle that a Londoner never hears the roar of London, I suppose?"

"Exactly. An old lady I know once came across a remarkable instance of it. She watched a shipwreck, the real article, with all the scenic accessories, and when a half-drowned sailor was dragged ashore she asked him how he felt at that awful moment. And what do you think he said?"

"Very wet," laughed Helen.

"No, that is the other story. This man said he was very dry."

"Ah! the one step from the sublime to the ridiculous, which reminds me that if I remain here much longer talking nonsense I shall lose the good opinion I am sure you have formed of me from Mr. Mackenzie's letter. Why, it must be after eleven o'clock! Are you going any farther, or will you walk with me to the hotel?"

"If you will allow me—"

"Indeed, I shall be very glad of your company. I came out to escape my own thoughts. Did you ever meet such an unsociable lot of people as our fellow boarders, Mr. Spenser? If it was not for my work, and the fact that I have taken my room for a month, I should hie me forthwith to the beaten track of the vulgar but good natured tourist."

"Why not go? Let me help you to-morrow to map out a tour. Then I shall know precisely where to waylay you; for I feel the chill here too."

"I wish I could fall in with the first part of your proposal, though the second rather suggests that you regard Mr. Mackenzie's letter of introduction as a letter of marque."

"At any rate, I am an avowed pirate," he could not help retorting. "But, to keep strictly to business, why not quit if you feel like wandering?"

"Because I was sent here on a journalistic mission which I understand less now than when I received it in London. Of course, I